

Jonathan Horwitz talks with Lenore Norrgard about Shamanic Activism

Lenore: Before we start, would you mind telling me what inspired you to ask me about shamanism, activism, and politics?

Jonathan: I think, initially, many of us may come to shamanism because we feel we need empowerment, and shamanic healing is very empowering. But I've noticed that a lot of people coming to shamanism get short-circuited. Looking around, it seems some practitioners use their shamanic practice as sort of a spiritual backdrop for their lives, rather than living it as a path that must constantly respond to life in order to be authentic. Many people also get caught up in technique, rather than actually living a practice.

What I aim for now when I teach, from the very basic workshop, is to get people to live the things they're actually taught and shown by the spirits, rather than getting hung up on technique. I feel strongly that shamanic practice is about taking what you get from the spirits, and taking it further, together with the spirits.

And as I've watched you work, I see that is what you're doing with your activism. I see you pursuing a legitimate spiritual path called shamanic activism, which can include political activism and ecological activism. I see that pathway as one of the possible routes that a living shamanic practice can take.

Lenore: You also mentioned to me that you've seen a divorce between shamanism and activism, or spirituality and politics, and that that's a problem.

Jonathan: Yes. Michael Harner always used to be adamant that shamanism is not political. I get so interested by this, because a lot of people, especially younger Americans, say, "I'm not into politics." They just can't see that that, in itself, is an incredibly political statement. Do you follow me?

Lenore: Right!

Jonathan: Because there are people—politicians, in fact—who are going to decide the fate of the Earth.

Of course, a lot of people were disappointed by Obama in his first term, and, personally, I wish he'd shown his teeth more in

the beginning. But parties and politicians aside, there's the environment, the Earth, which is an incredibly political issue.

So I really get worried when shamanic practitioners tell me, with a perfectly straight face, that "politics doesn't matter, the Earth will survive." As if "surviving" is enough. I look at them, and say, "Listen, the Earth is losing 100 species every day—what about them? They're not surviving." I want the Earth to thrive. So, I'm interested in trying to get shamanic folks to become more active. To be activists.

Lenore: Okay. I get it.

Jonathan: So maybe we could start at the beginning—what's your story? How did you come to the path of shamanic activism?

Lenore: Well, I grew up in a religious family that was very supportive of the Civil Rights Movement. My father was a pastor who preached something called "the social gospel," applying Jesus' teachings to contemporary social issues, not unlike Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. My younger brother was adopted from the Menominee tribe, so between the Civil Rights Movement and my awareness of my brother's ethnicity, I was conscious of race and racism from a very early age.

Now, my parents' religion didn't catch with me, but their social values did. In my early teens I protested the war in Vietnam, and was an early feminist, and in the mid-1970s I became involved in radical politics. However, as an artist I found party politics too constricting, and went my own way, remaining an independent activist and becoming a photojournalist and writer.

Jonathan: Early indications! But how did you get from there to shamanism?

Lenore: I had never considered myself spiritual, but I carried deep wounds from my childhood, and struggled with clinical depression for decades. In 1987 an animal spirit intervened and blessed me with a spontaneous healing. My depression was finished overnight. What could I do but become spiritual?! One of my very first thoughts, after gratitude, was, *Oh! This is what's been missing from the political work! If I can receive such a miraculous healing, personally, why can't we have miracles of social healing, too?*

Jonathan: Good question!

Lenore: At that point I shifted from a paradigm of social revolution to one of social healing, and started naming things like racism and misogyny as *social wounds*, and wondering how we could heal them.

I was alone with my initiatory experience, and didn't know anything about shamanism. When Sandra Ingerman's book, *Soul Retrieval*, came out in 1991, I read that. And I immediately realized that we had experienced soul loss as a nation with the assassinations of Dr. King, the Kennedys, and Malcolm X, and also with the betrayal of the Democratic Party convention in 1968 and later, Watergate. Our citizenry was a broken body politic, paralyzed in the face of a right-wing reaction to the gains of Civil Rights, feminism, labor, etc.

I received intensive training with the Foundation for Shamanic Studies, and then started teaching, all along thinking about this question of shamanic social healing.

The first social healing ritual I developed was *Dreaming the Dark*, a celebration to honor and receive healing from the spirit of darkness. The intention was to heal our relationship with the Dark, the Western repository of all bad things. *Dreaming the Dark* became a highly-anticipated, annual winter solstice celebration in the Pacific Northwest.

Jonathan: When was that?

Lenore: I think the first one was in 1994.

Jonathan: I suppose some people understood the ritual as political, and others did not.

Lenore: True. In fact, I think there are different ways for shamanic practitioners to influence the political situation. We can participate in community organizing meetings, and bring the perspective of the spirits into planning that work. And there is very private work, like the Buddhist practice of *tonglen*, and other practices to help shift the social and Earth

vibration, that we can do alone. Another level is doing closed healing rituals and other circle work that is focused on social healing, like *Dreaming the Dark*. And we can do very public things, like bringing ritual into public protest, and thereby transforming it.

I've had decades when I've been out in the streets protesting, and years where it's been more about writing. I've worked privately in shamanic circles, and I've also done a lot of very public, interfaith work, infusing shamanism into interfaith social activism, and also bringing the power of ritual into public protests. Now I'm making a dramatic film, *AMERICAN UBUNTU*, which weaves together shamanism, Earth activism, and politics.

Jonathan: When you're working in shamanic circles, doing work on behalf of social or Earth issues, how do you approach that? I can imagine all kinds of interesting ethical issues arising, like how much can I ask my spirits to interfere with the proposed Monte Belo monster dam on the Xingu River in the Amazon basin, that kind of thing.

Lenore: Yes, as with all shamanic work, I am careful about asking for specific outcomes. I usually include a caveat that our work ultimately serves the highest good of all, because we don't have the whole picture. Through our shamanic work, we can get a peek at the big view. But, for example, with the election, I wasn't willing to do shamanic work specifically for an Obama victory, because maybe Romney needed to win, so that we can have a revolution. How would I know the best outcome of the election? So I think one crucial thing in shamanic activism is to have humility as we stand before the Great Mystery, and to know that we haven't got the meta view. It is hubris to think that we can know how the specific outcome of each individual struggle will affect the whole. Does that make sense?

Jonathan: Of course it does.

Lenore: This came up recently in my drumming circle. Someone said that

Monsanto Corporation is the embodiment of evil, and we should ask the spirits to destroy it. After discussion, we asked instead for whatever was necessary for harmony and healing on the planet with regard to Monsanto, and left it up to the spirits as to how they want to handle that.

Another time I was teaching a *Shamanism for Activists* weekend, and it happened that the World Trade Organization was meeting at the same time. Naturally, people wanted to journey about putting a stop to globalization. I told them, "My heart is really with you. But remember what I said, about having humility before the Great Mystery? We do not know, ultimately, what the role of globalization is in the evolution of the world." The amazing thing was that these activists all nodded their heads, soberly. And we reframed the question as, "What is our right relationship to globalization?" It was a very powerful journey, with not a few tears.

Jonathan: Sometimes I'm really torn, when I become very emotionally involved and really want to do something like that. One way is to ask to see a given situation through one of my spirit helper's or teacher's eyes. And although sometimes you don't get a total view, you often can get a more nuanced view. You can see a lot of things that aren't immediately apparent.

Lenore: Yes, exactly.

Jonathan: Because if you're going to use the spirits to engage as an activist, you have to go into the activism from their point of view, and *not* from your personal point of view.

Lenore: Right. One of the most powerful things shamanism can bring to activism is exactly this. It can help us to work on issues, and work in the midst of conflicts, in a way that brings about harmony and connection. *Because one of the root problems, if not THE root problem, on the planet, is the human illusion of separation.* Not only separation from spirit, but from one another, from the Earth – and sometimes from ourselves. I feel the danger in

getting very vociferous is that we end up feeding that separation.

So, we need continually to ask our spirits how to enter into these crucial conflicts in ways that reduce separation, and in ways that bring about the sense of interconnection. That is the very foundation for shifting our relationship with one another—and with the Earth.

This shift in consciousness is crucial, or we can get all caught up in how "evil" Monsanto is. Actually, we could say that Monsanto is the ultimate expression of the human illusion of separation—thinking that we can somehow manipulate genes, that we can take land and seeds from other people and destroy their lives, and not be affected ourselves. We've created that—humanity has created that illusion of separation. Monsanto actually is a manifestation of a fundamental misunderstanding on the part of humanity.

Jonathan: You're onto something. Separation is our guiding illusion, and propagates fear and greed, which are like the Mordor driving forces of the human world today. So, when going into an activist setting, entering in with an angry *Us vs. Them* attitude is a dangerous thing. I think the best way to get to a more balanced state is to try to see things as the spirits do. And often the spirits have an agenda. But if they have an agenda, I'm willing to work for it—I trust their agenda more than I trust mine!

Lenore: Yes!

Jonathan: Tell me more about the interfaith activism.

Lenore: That really started when I attended the west coast founding conference of the Network of Spiritual Progressives (NSP), initiated by Rabbi Michael Lerner in 2005. The conference was overwhelmingly Christian and Jewish and white, so I helped start a Diversity caucus at the conference, to promote racial and all kinds of diversity, including spiritual. After, I campaigned for months to get an interfaith healing ritual on the agenda of

the east coast NSP founding conference in Washington, D.C. It was a tremendous amount of work to get the ritual accepted, but many joined me in calling for it, and when it was won, I invited Myron Eschowsky to collaborate with me. We carried it out across from the White House, in Lafayette Park.

When we told the Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Buddhist, and spiritual-not-religious participants that our intention was to heal the history of violence in the name of religion, they got it, immediately—their response was, "Oh, yeah, we really need to do that."

Jonathan: Wow. That's really brave of you. What happened?

Lenore: Some of the participants said it was the most powerful spiritual experience they had in the four-day conference.

When I returned to Portland, where I was living at the time, another interfaith peace group had heard about the D.C. ritual, and asked if I would do one for them. So we talked and I journeyed, and we did a public peacemaking ritual for our neighborhood, which was torn by gentrification. It turned out that the day before the ritual there was a huge escalation in the war, and many people were upset—so not only people from the immediate neighborhood came, but beyond. They said they came because they felt helpless, and wanted to do something positive, instead of another anti-war protest. They left feeling empowered and hopeful.

Jonathan: That reminds me of when I got back from Viet Nam in 1966 and I joined in the Anti-War movement. But a few years later I got involved in the Peace Movement.

Lenore: Exactly! In 2008, I wrote in *Sacred Hoop* magazine about my vision of transforming mass social protests into massive public rituals of social healing. I had come to feel that the practice of protest had become disempowering in anti-war demonstrations, we would be given a prescribed route to

march, then we would hear a bunch of speakers and performers, then we were asked for donations, and then we were dismissed to go home. And I thought, "Dis-empowered again." It had become awfully rote, and instead of people connecting with their own power, and expressing that together, on behalf of the greater good, it'd become like the worst of going to church—you know? You get a moment to feel good that you did the right thing—but did it affect anything?

What if, instead, we all encircled the Pentagon and created a huge field of love around it? The Pentagon is filled with people. We can affect their hearts, and affect what they actually do. So instead of making a big *Us vs. Them* protest, and feeding conflict, we can create peace. I also wrote about bringing in the ancestors to help us to do this, and connecting with the spirits of the land.

Jonathan: Do you see these public rituals going beyond the interfaith activist movement?

Lenore: They must—and they have. This happened for the first time in 2009, when I was asked to put together a ritual for the national conference of the Peace and Justice Studies Association. That was a real turning point, because it was the first time a secular group asked me to put together a ritual. I journeyed and asked, "Please show me a peacemaking ritual for a secular group, that reaches them, and that they will participate in." My spirits showed me that what we needed to do was a Coronation of the Collective Heart. They said, "People will understand that. They know the word coronation. It's about crowning a sovereign. This is about installing the collective heart as the sovereign of the world."

Jonathan: That's beautiful. And by going to your spirits with this it gives a perfect example of what I think of when I talk about "shamanic activism."

Lenore: It was really amazing. I saw in my journey a huge garland of flowers for this coronation, and I thought,

That's a cool metaphor, how shall we do that? Later I learned that the word coronation comes from the word corona, the Latin word for garland! Ultimately, we actually made a 100 foot long garland—some shamanic folks made a base garland of greens, and blessed it, and a florist donated hundreds and hundreds of flowers.

The ritual itself was very transformational. One man who at the opening had his arms folded, but who stayed and participated in weaving the flowers into the garland, and hoisting it, at the end wiped tears from his eyes, and joined in the crowd's cheers for accomplishing this Coronation of the Collective Heart. The energy generated was palpable and lasted several days, and stayed with people as they dispersed to different parts of the country.

Jonathan: That's how it should be.

Lenore: One thing I've found is that, as we enter the political arena, it is a fantastic arena for our spiritual unfolding.

Jonathan: This is the direct opposite of what many experience. Say more.

Lenore: Well, here's an example: As I was developing the ritual I just described, I kept getting email reminders about registering for the conference. However, the only way to register was to pay the registration fee. So I emailed the man who had requested the ritual, and said, *Hey, I'm happy to register, but since I'm putting together and leading this ritual, and also teaching a workshop for free, can you just add my name?* He wrote me back and lambasted me for suggesting I shouldn't have to pay.

His response, in fact, was very angry and toxic. He suggested that he would be happy to drop me from the program and that given my attitude it probably was just as well. I felt the force of his rage; I'm sensitive and it really affected me. Of course part of me reacted and wanted to just write back *To hell with you, I don't need to work for you for free, and then pay you to boot.* But I also was struck that this guy is a leader of some renown, as I was

becoming, and what power has a peace movement if we can't even sort things out among ourselves?

So I slept on it, and the next day I went online and registered, and paid. Then I wrote him and said, *Look, I must have hit a raw nerve with my request. I have just registered and paid for the conference, and would like to go forward with the ritual. And if you don't want me to, then I'll just consider my registration fee a donation to a good cause.*

Jonathan: Phew! Powerful move.

Lenore: It was. Paying the fee really stretched me—in more ways than one -- but I did not want to lose the opportunity to bring ritual activism into a secular environment, and felt that making this sacrifice was part and parcel of the peace-making work.

The guy wrote back and said, *You're right, I'm overwhelmed, you did hit a raw nerve . . . Thanks for handling this with much more grace than I did.* So this process somehow lifted both him and me up, and I think this was not only part of my own spiritual practice, but also part of the social healing involved in that piece of work.

Jonathan: As it does so often! So where does your filmmaking come into all of this?

Lenore: In the late 1990s, I went to film school in the Bay Area. I understood the power of stories in creating ourselves and our world, and had an idea that we needed new stories, but I wasn't aware of any particular new story I had to tell. In Spring 2001, I returned to Seattle, and thought it was time to advance the shamanic social healing work, so in August I announced a Fall circle called *Reweaving the Web: Healing Our World*. Flyers went out and people were signing up, when one day I was doing a soul retrieval, and my spirits piped up, "You need to do film." I said, "Well, I'm helping people, I'm doing good work." They said, "No, you have a big message, and you need this bigger tool."

Jonathan: Your spirits knew before you did.

Lenore: Yes, and I knew what that meant as soon as they said it: I had to return to the Bay Area, and would commute to lead *Reweaving the Web*.

On September 10, I left Seattle with a carload of my things, and overnighted with some friends near sacred Mount Shasta. That's where I was on the morning of 9/11. When I got to San Francisco later that day, I curled up on my futon, asking myself, *How do I respond to this, as a healer, as a filmmaker, and an activist?* For days I meditated on this, and that is when the characters who would later populate my screenplay, AMERICAN UBUNTU, first revealed themselves and their predicaments to me. I didn't actually start writing the story for a few years, though, after I'd moved to Portland.

Jonathan: And Portland is where you engaged in all that interfaith activism?

Lenore: Yes. And throughout the ritual activism my spirits were tapping their paws, saying, *What about film? This needs to be done.* In between the activism and the demands of my shamanic practice I occasionally would steal a week or two and go away and work on the script, but it was coming too slowly, and I constantly felt torn.

Finally, I got clear that I really needed to focus on the film: it was my activism and social healing ministry, as well as my art, rolled into one. If I was going to actually make this movie, I had to focus, or it never would happen. After several drafts, AMERICAN UBUNTU, finally arrived at the current one. The story is a culmination of all the things we've been talking about—shamanic activism, and the collapsing of polarizations. As Christina Pratt said, "This is a movie that shows how shamanism actually works—grappling with real world problems, and solving things."

Jonathan: I can't wait to see it!

Lenore: I can't wait, either! In the summer of 2011 I moved to Oakland to set about bringing it into production. And then the Occupy Wall Street movement began, and I was powerfully drawn to it.

Jonathan: Of course you were! There was a lot going on in Oakland, too, wasn't there?

Lenore: Yes. It was huge. I started getting involved. I wrote about it from a shamanic perspective, held a teleseminar, and did a *Tuesday Morning Conversation* with Christina Pratt. But I saw the writing on the wall: *Lenore, if you get involved in this, AMERICAN UBUNTU never will be made.* I feel that making that choice—to hold back from getting deeply involved in Occupy, and keep a clear focus on the film—has served well.

Jonathan: That's a really good point, how important it is to be really present, and aware of your role in a given situation. So there were all these temptations, but you kept your focus throughout.

I think focus is something that we can lose, very quickly and easily. In closing, would you tell us a little about AMERICAN UBUNTU? You call it "a healing story for the USA." What does *ubuntu* mean?

Lenore: Ubuntu is a Zulu word. It means, *I am what I am, because of who we all are.* In the story, I apply this to the very diverse country the USA is today: *Americans are what we are, because of who we all are.*

Jonathan: That's a very powerful, and important, statement, in a country so split as the U.S. is today.

Lenore: It is truly a shamanic tale of our times. One of the main characters is in the ancestral realm. The script has won an award, and at this point I'm looking for a professional producer. I've always known this film would be made through a groundswell of support from the shamanic and spiritual activist communities.

Jonathan: For me, what you have been

talking about is what I see as the role of the shamanic activist: to bring healing to our world with the help of the spirits, living the teachings they give us, following the path they show us. Thank you for doing that. It's been inspiring.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

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